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The Liberatory Potential of Caribbean Women

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Myriam J. A. Chancy, *From Sugar to Revolution: Women's Visions of Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic*. (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2012), xxxiii + 301pp.

Myriam Chancy's latest study is a stunning achievement in comparative analysis of Caribbean cultures. It is simply a master class for those of us who attempt to make sense of the complex histories of the region and the written works and visual arts that result. In this rich text, Chancy juxtaposes works by women of Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, highlighting the long-standing relationships of the nations of Hispaniola and the largest Antillean island. Chancy divides the book into three parts, each dedicated to one of the three countries of the title; each part contains two chapters, one of critical analysis and the other a full conversation with an artist. The inclusion of an interview with an artist immediately after extensive critical analysis may be discomfiting at first for the reader, and yet it lends an element of polyphony to the text, highlighting the hollowness of critical distance that many of us as scholars employ when writing and teaching.

In her preface, she challenges the disciplinary exile in which Haiti is placed with respect to American, Latin American, and Caribbean Studies, writing: "that [her] intention is to highlight the ways that *racist* essentialism has demarcated Haitians and other groups of African descent within the Caribbean as subalterns without agency" (xv). She develops this argument in her substantial and impressive introduction, "*Y donde esta tu abuela?: On the Respective Racial (Mis)Identifications of Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic in the Context of Latin America and the Caribbean.*" A riff on a well-known saying in the Spanish Caribbean, made most famous by Fortunato Vizcarrondo's poem "*¿Y tu agüela, a'onde ejta?*" (1942), Chancy's introduction is a sustained examination of the erasure of Haiti within these disciplines, written with the explicit intent to "expose hypocrisies in fields often devoted to uplifting the marginalized and giving voice to the voiceless" (xv). She makes a strong case that the dismissal of Haiti in Latin Americanist scholarship produced across the Americas reveals a hemispheric anxiety about blackness in general. She goes on to highlight the work of "scholars Susan Buck-Morss, Sibylle Fischer, and Michel Rolph-Trouillot [who] have each

sought to demonstrate Haiti's centrality in philosophical discourses of modernity, liberation, and enlightenment" (35). For her, these intellectuals are exceptional, as she charges: "the silence cloaking Haiti's role in the universal or 'world' playground of modern history is more profound than merely an absence occasioned by the process of historicization; it is a deliberate, even violent occlusion" (35). She then concludes this section by demonstrating the extent to which the construction of the nationalisms of Cuba and the Dominican Republic is dependent upon a contradistinction to Haiti. For her, sovereignty, sugar, and revolution have not only shaped these islands, they are the threads by which Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic are inextricably tied. The women writers and artists of her study interrupt predominant academic discourses about these nations; acting as archeologists, they excavate the sites of amnesia within nationalisms constructed, controlled, and disciplined by explicitly heteropatriarchal cultures, thereby contributing to the new definitions of nationhood (xxi-xxiii).

She dedicates the first part of her text to Haiti and the role of sugar in the development of the island's history. In the first chapter, "Facing the Mountains: Dominican Suppression and the Haitian Imaginary in the Works of Julia Alvarez and Edwidge Danticat," Chancy foregrounds the commonalities shared by the nations of Hispaniola that have been obscured by political leaders of both countries. In one striking section, she features Dominican and Haitian civil resistance to the U.S. Occupation in both countries (Haiti, 1915-1934; the Dominican Republic, 1916-1924), a historical moment that has gone woefully understudied. In less than ten pages, she reveals how in the first decades of the twentieth century, there was aid and support against the occupying forces of the United States among the populations of these nations, and yet knowledge of this episode and indeed, of shared histories, have been lost in subsequent decades. For her, Julia Alvarez's *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* (1992), and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) are emblematic of Dominican and Dominican American anxieties about race and class, as poverty and blackness have been assimilated in the Dominican imaginary for decades now as "Haitian." Chancy then juxtaposes Alvarez's texts with Angie Cruz's novel *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005), which she suggests offers a more complete reflection of the multiracial Dominican nation. After a historical overview of the Parsley Massacre of 1937, she then moves on to Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1999), a novel which also calls attention to the common traumas suffered by the inhabitants of Hispaniola on both sides of the border. Chancy follows the chapter with an informative interview with Edwidge Danticat that she titles "Recovering History 'Bone by Bone'."

In the second part, an analysis of sovereignty using Cuba as a case study, Chancy analyzes the theme of sovereignty. She immediately delves into critical analysis in her third chapter, “*Travesía: Crossings of Sovereignty, Sexuality, and Race in the Cuban Female Imaginaries of Zoé Valdés, Nancy Morejón, and María Magdalena Campos-Pons.*” These artists demonstrate the potential of women to subvert traditional roles and more broadly a political reality that has been clearly weakened in the decades since the Revolution. For Chancy, Zoé Valdés’s *Yocandra in the Paradise of Night* (1997) and *I Gave You All I Had* (2000) reveal the fragmented and incompleteness of this island’s fight for sovereignty. In the embers of revolution, both the novelist Valdés and the critic Chancy identify women as the key to the securing of a more humane and just Cuba. Chancy next analyzes several poems by Nancy Morejón, one of Cuba’s most famous living poets and writers. She provides a nuanced reading of Morejón’s “*Mujer Negra*” (1975), a widely-anthologized poem in which the poet re-inscribes Cuban nationalism by including black women thereby rendering them visible as active participants in the nation. Finally, she analyzes the work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons. In her series of photographs *When I Am Not Here / Estoy Allá* (1994-1997), as well as in her performance piece *The Seven Powers Come by the Sea* (1992), the artist invokes the sacred entities of *Regla de Ocha*, the syncretic Afro-Cuban religion. What Morejón accomplishes in written word, Chancy argues that Campos-Pons does in her art, using her own black female body as a site of the sacred and therefore inviolate in spite of the history of the exploitation of black women throughout the hemisphere. She follows this with a dialogue with Campos-Pons entitled “*Recovering Origins.*”

In the third part of her study, Chancy relates the theme of revolution to the Dominican Republic. Her fifth chapter is “*Subversive Sexualities: Marilyn Bobes, Achy Obejas, and Loida Maritza Pérez on Revolutionizing Gendered Identities against Cuban and Dominican Landscapes.*” She begins with an examination of a sculpture by Dominican artist Dorandy Mercado; entitled *Mujeres: Dominican Men’s Favorite Sport* (2010), it is the female form composed of baseballs. Mercado juxtaposes the motifs of sport, sexuality, and violence in her meditation on the relationship between men and women in the Dominican national imaginary. For Chancy, the piece evokes the supposed debauchery of women of African descent throughout the region; she then contrasts this with literary representations of lesbianism in the works of a Cuban, a Cuban American, and a Dominican American writer who are writing against a taboo that remains in firmly entrenched throughout the region. For her, the suppression of Caribbean women’s homosexuality underscores discourses of nation that are ingrained in race (whiteness) and gender (masculinity). Marginalized sexualities of women therefore represent an alternate liberatory space not only on the individual level

but indeed for the community that is the nation as a whole. In their short stories “Somebody Has to Cry” (1998) and “We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?” (1998), Marilyn Bobes and Achy Obejas respectively provide visions of lesbianism within Cuba and in exile. With Bobes’s protagonist Maritza, who we learn of through the voices of her friends after her suicide, her life is rendered visible in death. Indeed, though the protagonist is compelled to live a heterosexual existence, it becomes clear in the aftermath of her death that her friends, those who had denied her, recognized who she was in all of her complexity. For Chancy, there exists therefore a potential for the creation of alternate emancipatory spaces within a society that marginalizes that which it acknowledges. Achy Obejas’s short story shows the convolution of exile in that there is often the maintenance of traditional cultures within the new space. Nevertheless, migration to the United States offers the Cuban exile the potential of self-actualization. Chancy ends the chapter with an analysis of Loida Maritza Pérez’s outstanding novel *Geographies of Home* (1999). Unlike the small number of critics who have examined this book (myself included), Chancy focuses on the insidiousness of anti-Haitianism within the Dominican imaginary as represented in the novel by Marina, the mentally ill sister of the protagonist. She follows this with an interview with Pérez herself.

Chancy concludes her study with “*Non progredi regredi est*: The Making of Transformative Visions.” Though brief, the conclusion summarizes the preceding work as well as puts forth important questions about the future of Caribbean scholarship and of the region as a whole. Placing women’s stories and their lives at the center of the region’s history allows for a reconsideration of episodes previously rendered unimportant and this act in and of itself she considers to be revolutionary. She writes: “Women’s visions as I’ve explored them throughout this study, in fact, suggest that the destruction of the status quo, the patriarchal, racialized mode of nation-building, need not repeat its wounding violence; there is something that lies beyond it. Indeed, in asserting the collective memories of the underprivileged and discounted classes, and women’s place within them, the destruction of the status quo can only but bring about a reconstructive healing” (301). The future of the region therefore is dependent upon the full recognition of and participation by women in all areas of life in all of their raced, sexed, (trans) gendered realities; this study offers but a glimpse of the vast potential that remains untapped.

This text is a remarkable achievement, not only in terms of the depth of knowledge and research it reveals but also due to the writing itself. It is a beautifully *written* study, one in which the language in which she conveys her ideas makes those very arguments all the more convincing. Each part of this study

is self-contained: the reader can select even a section of a chapter of this text and come away learning something new. Read together, the interviews themselves offer a dynamic representation of the Caribbean by three of the most celebrated artists of the region. In addition, while her arguments are quite persuasive, some of Chancy's strongest rejoinders are found not in the main text but in her considerable notes. As a resource, the numerous secondary sources to which Chancy refers establish a significant interdisciplinary bibliography about race, women, nation, and the Caribbean. Importantly, she utilizes scholarship published in Canada that is overlooked by many of us in the rest of the Americas. *From Sugar to Revolution* is that rare study that both challenges and emboldens us, her audience; for those of us who are scholars, she prompts a re-examination of our responsibilities to ourselves, to our students, and to the men, women, and children who live in this region and in the larger diasporas. It is a remarkable addition to our on-going conversations about race, gender, sexuality, regionalism, migration, diaspora, and identity formation, and deserves to be widely-known by students and scholars alike.